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WASHINGTON (AP) - A SOVIET SPY SATELLITE CARRYING NUCLEAR-POWERED RADAR HAS BEEN ACTING ERRATICALLY AND U.S. INTELLIGENCE SOURCES SAID TODAY IT MAY FALL INTO THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE LATE THIS MONTH. ACCORDING TO THE SOURCES, IT IS TOO EARLY TO TELL WHERE THE SATELLITE MAY ENTER THE ATMOSPHERE FROM ITS PRESENT RELATIVELY LOW ORBIT.

FIVE YEARS AGO, A SIMILAR SOVIET SATELLITE DISINTEGRATED AFTER DROPPING FROM ORBIT OVER FAR NORTHERN CANADA AND RADIOACTIVE DEBRIS LANDED IN A SPARSELY POPULATED AREA NEAR GREAT SLAVE LAKE. THAT INCIDENT BROUGHT A CALL BY THEN-PRESIDENT CARTER FOR A BAN ON SATELLITES USING NUCLEAR REACTORS AS SOURCES OF POWER. SINCE THEN, SAID SOURCES WHO DECLINED TO BE IDENTIFIED, THE SOVIET UNION HAS CONTINUED TO SEND ALOFT THE SAME TYPE OF SATELLITE, WHOSE MISSION IS TO OBSERVE SHIP MOVEMENTS, PARTICULARLY THE U.S. FLEET, IN THE WORLD'S SEAS.

THE INTELLIGENCE SOURCES SAID THERE IS STRONG EVIDENCE THAT COSMOS 1402 HAS BEEN HAVING DIFFICULTIES AND THAT, BECAUSE OF WHAT WAS DESCRIBED AS ITS ERRATIC BEHAVIOR, THE RUSSIANS PROBABLY CAN'T BOOST IT INTO A HIGHER ORBIT. CUSTOMARILY, THE SOVIETS SEND SUCH SATELLITES INTO A HIGHER ORBIT AFTER THEY HAVE COMPLETED THEIR SPY MISSION SO THEY WILL NOT FALL BACK TO EARTH. EXPERTS SAID SUCH A PRACTICE IS INTENDED TO KEEP THE SATELLITES AND THEIR RADIOACTIVE MATERIALS IN THAT HIGHER ORBIT FOR 500 YEARS.

COSMOS 1402 WAS LAUNCHED AUG. 30 AND U.S. ANALYSTS SAID IT HAS JUST ABOUT COMPLETED ITS MISSION. SUCH SATELLITES NORMALLY STAY ALOFT FOR ABOUT SIX MONTHS, OFFICIALS SAID.

THE OCEAN SURVEILLANCE SATELLITE IS SAID BY U.S. EXPERTS TO CARRY ABOUT 100 POUNDS OF ENRICHED URANIUM TO POWER ITS RADAR DEVICES, WHICH SCAN THE OCEAN SURFACES.

THE SOVIETS USUALLY KEEP TWO TO THREE SUCH SATELLITES IN ORBIT AT ANY GIVEN TIME TO PROVIDE WIDE COVERAGE.

THE UNITED STATES, LIKE THE SOVIET UNION, HAS A WIDE VARIETY OF RECONNAISSANCE AND OTHER SATELLITES IN ORBIT, BUT NONE CARRIES ANY NUCLEAR MATERIALS, ACCORDING TO U.S. SOURCES.

AFTER THE FALL OF COSMOS 954 OVER CANADA IN JANUARY 1978, THE UNITED STATES MADE A POINT OF EXPRESSING "HUMANITARIAN CONCERN" WHEN THE SOVIET UNION LAUNCHED ANOTHER SUCH SATELLITE IN 1980.

SINCE THEN, THE UNITED STATES HAS NOT REPEATED SUCH A PUBLIC PROTEST.